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## THOUGHTS ON ART AND THE ART COLLECTOR

By WILLIAM SARTAIN

THE feeling of admiration for art is inherent in all finer natures. In all epochs of the world's history when nations rose to higher level of civilization the Fine Arts flourished. The Greeks were superior to their contemporaries in all branches of philosophy and literature; so the plastic arts, sculpture and architecture rose to the highest level. With them it was not merely the handmaid of luxury, but was employed in *celebrating* the greatest things of life.

When the Macedonian prince Demetrius was laying siege to Rhodes in the island of that name a deputation of citizens came to point out that on one side of the city was the Temple adorned with the great paintings by Polygnotus, and if he attacked there, they would be ruined. Demetrius shifted his attack to the other side of the city in order not to destroy them, saying, he would as soon smash his own father's portrait as to injure them. Such was the feeling for art among the Greeks . . . it was almost a Religion. It ministered above all to the devotion of the people to the gods and heroes. At Delphi there were almost as many statues as there were people. The Romans were not artists in the sense that were the Greeks. But they loved art sufficiently to carry off thousands of Greek statues after they had conquered the country.

Seven conflagrations destroyed many of them, yet there have been sixty thousand statues dug up at Rome.

Beauty of color, above all of form, is found in all the great periods of art. The harmony and rhythm of music and poetry have their counterpart in painting, sculpture and architecture. They are sister arts and in every epoch we find them all expressing the deeper feelings of the time.

One may admire *Skill* in the representing of objects, but the deepest admiration is only given to what, by its skilful technique, expresses something beyond a mere *copy* of nature. We enjoy skill in athletics and dancing; but only when *beautiful* pose and action are combined with the skill are we greatly impressed. Beauty must predominate. A work of art must be a work of spiritual beauty as well as of intellectual skill. It is the *combination* of the two that makes a work of art Great.

As a great work of art appeals, primarily, to the soul—far more than to the intellect alone—it is not the professional artist only that is moved by and appreciates it, but all superior natures gifted with capacity for being emotioned by the beautiful or sublime. We have seen skilful "stunts" attract attention, and a certain admiration called forth by technical talent, but they never hold their sway for long over other than inferior natures devoid of the finer feelings for higher things. Of talent as compared with genius Hawthorne says: "It lacks that indescribable nothing, that inestimable something, that constitutes the life and soul through which the picture gets its immortality."

This is true of all the arts. Most of the greatest works of literature are enjoyed by the cultivated as well as by professional writers. Shakespeare, for instance, does not awaken the enthusiasm of the litterateur alone—all who read his works feel, more

or less, his greatness. The Venus de Milo would be ranked high by men of taste as well as by the professional sculptor. The great cathedrals appeal to all who have a soul—they inspire an admiration and an awe that does not fade, . . . it becomes stronger the more we see them.

The test of the greatness of a work of art is this *continuous* hold that it has on the feelings—and its hold on successive generations. It does not depend on surprising us by its *novelty*—and such a superficial surprise is invariably an indication of superficial excellence only. Too many are apt to be lured by the fad of Novelty. There are some who read the popular novels of the day who have never read "Don Quixote," one of the world's greatest books, not an abstruse or dry sort of fiction.

## DELAY IN RECOGNITION OF ART

How often have we seen great art wait so long for recognition that the unhappy artist passed away before it came. Heine says: "The artist is the child of fable whose tears were all pearls. Alas! his wicked stepmother, the World, beats him the more unmercifully—that he may weep plenty of pearls." How true is this allegory! We can all recall names of those who attained great worldly success and reputation who are now ignored and their works forgotten—and of others whom we now honor most, the real artists, who were long neglected or but scantily recognized.

It must be admitted that the born artist has in him much of that divine impulse that *impels* him to do the work which nobody will purchase or praise. Like the religious saints, he feels he has a mission that urges him on to *express what is in him*. It is in both cases an irresistible striving towards an ideal, nowise connected with his material well-being, but an inborn impulse that he cannot, nor would not, stifle. Hence, when the world has come to appreciate his work, it gives an unstinted admiration to the martyr for a noble ideal, a homage to the man as well as to the achievement.

We are better and greater in proportion to our appreciation of what is fine and noble, and by the cultivation of our finer taste we are helped to see and enjoy the beauties of nature . . . it poetizes us. Surround yourself with fine works of art, read the greatest works of literature, hear the finest music—and you increase your capacity for understanding and enjoyment and are ennobled by the emotions they call forth. By ignoring the gratification of such instincts the latter become atrophied—as the fishes of the Mammoth Cave, living in darkness, have lost the sense of sight.

In his autobiography Darwin has an oft-quoted passage. After speaking of his gradually increasing *distaste* for Poetry, Pictures and Music, he says: "This curious and lamentable loss of the higher æsthetic tastes is all the odder, as books and essays on all subjects interest me as much as ever they did. . . . My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding out general laws out of large collections of facts; but why this should have caused the atrophy of that part of the brain alone on which

the higher tastes depend, I cannot conceive. . . . If I had to live my life over again, I would have made a rule to read some poetry and listen to some music at least once a week; for, perhaps, the part of my brain now atrophied would thus have been kept alive through use. The loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect, and more probably to the moral character, by enfeebling the emotional part of our nature."

This proves that some interests and amusements simply wipe out part of your existence, others leave you no finer, or less fine, in character. Hence, it is of the highest importance that the Finer Art should be constantly within reach.

Therefore a good Museum of Art educates the better part of our spiritual nature, just as the common schools educate our ordinary mental faculties. No one neglects the latter, for it is absolutely necessary for our material existence. But there is not enough appreciation among the Public of what can be done for the higher education of the world. This is the more difficult to be realized from the fact that it is not something tangible. But it must not be forgotten that, in proportion as it is intangible, it is a higher and nobler part of our nature. Religion, be it in the form of any of the established creeds, or a vague, ceremony-lacking aspiration toward higher ideals, is of this nature. All these emotions are such as cannot be analyzed or defined. This mystery is not of the sort that puzzles us, but one that we accept with rapture and gratitude.

We can now understand why mere technical skill, a merely *intellectual* rendering of form or color, while accepted as the perfection of æsthetic knowledge and craftsmanship, can never be ranked alongside of the inspired art in which this un-analyzable *art quality* exists. As Walter Pater says: "In the proportion in which, in pottery, or any other art, the worker asserts his *sense* of the thing, rather than the serviceable *fact or thing only*, it is fine art. Art is the reproduction of fact, color, etc., as connected with the soul."

Though the artist's power to render the artistic and faithful treatment of his theme, is all he has to consider, yet his work will be all the greater in proportion as his *soul* is expressed by the technique; it must assert itself. For, unconsciously to the artist, he is giving us a chapter of his autobiography. "What we are" says Emerson "that only can we see. The artist who is great sees the great things and reproduces them in his work." It is an intellectual and spiritual as well as an optical *vision*, an elimination of his ordinary mortal and material aims when he is at his work; while creating he is a being apart from his ordinary self, as seen by the world. Hence, we speak of the *inspiration* of an artist.

We see the long training and the laborious study of form and technique, but it is only the *language* which is being perfected—for the purpose of more freely *expressing* something else—a complete Work of Art. We see no signs in the skilful musician of his long playing of mere "scales." The music seems far away from any such mechanical drudgery, which is only the *road* by means of which to reach a goal beyond, and is nowise artistic in itself. Speaking of the superior merit of French poetry Goethe says: "It is because the French poets have knowledge, while our German simpletons think they would lose

their talent if they labored for knowledge; although, in fact, all talent must derive its nutriment from knowledge and is thus only enabled to use its strength."

The greater the talent, as a rule, the less likely it is to achieve *early* recognition. It has been truly said: "the original artist must not only create his *works*, but must also create his *Public*." The struggle is often too much for the artist, especially if a family be dependent upon him. This perpetual conflict of material needs and the impulse to do what their artistic nature cries out for them to accomplish often ends in death or madness.

Must we not then claim again that the world owes the talent a debt which should be paid while the artist lives? Could we but earlier learn to appreciate the genius that lies hidden owing to the want of public recognition!

#### RARITY OF THE CONNOISSEUR

The true connoisseur is rare, for he may be defined as one who can recognize talent before it is heralded from the house-tops. In proportion as people are more capable of seeing this early, so are they the wiser and finer. It has always been the case that, when too late recognized, there is a feeling of remorse at not having perceived what genius was offering us and recognizing our blindness that leads to a favoring of petty works that gained public attention at the moment.

Familiar intercourse with what museums of art offer to us, a study of the reproductions of the great works of genius and—instinctively trusting to the emotions these arouse in us—not listening to the contemporary art *fashion* too blindly, would do much toward cultivating a more elevated taste in the nation. The judgment of the crowd and of art critics has always played too great a part in the success of an artist—in his co-temporary and temporary success I mean. It would be an interesting thing to collect the opinions expressed on some of the artists whom we now rank high, when they first showed the works we now all accept as great art. Rarely would it correspond to the judgments of to-day. Whistler's "Mother," his greatest work, was exhibited in New York, Philadelphia, Boston and Chicago. What did the art "critics" say of it? Did they get excited over its merits? It was marked for sale at \$1,200. Did any of the "connoisseurs" offer anything for it? George Moore in his "Modern Painting" says that the Royal Academy only hung it when one of the Academicians vowed he would resign if they rejected it.

So also of a large number of the best things of the last century. The greater men struggled in poverty to the end, or almost the end, of their careers. Does it not seem almost incredible that a work of art selling to-day for thousands could with difficulty, during the life-time of the artist, find a purchaser for a fraction even of as many hundreds? A painting by Degas, for which he received but one hundred dollars, was recently sold for ninety thousand! The *want* of a "reputation" made its first selling price too low, and a *manufactured* "reputation"—boosted the price too high!

Art, in its best sense, being a sort of Religion, its aims are as elevating, its history similar. Hence it can show its martyrs, its devotees to things above

the material aims of common humanity; and, as in religion, the finest are the most prone to meet the martyr's fate. Does "the world beat the child of fable to make it weep plenty of pearls"?

Reputations are now and then made by ordinary men. But little by little the voice of the better judges is heard and eventually prevails, and then the great come into their own. Time at length converts the error of the moment and makes the greatness of an ideal and the splendor of its expression visible to all. Always, at a distance, petty things are not seen and the bigger things stand out in strong relief. So this fate possibly, to a certain extent, may always be in store for genius.

We have seen that the artist is born not made. The same is true of a wise and successful Art Collector.

#### OF THE ART COLLECTOR

There are things a collector thinks he must have, and it is often for reasons independent of the intrinsic value of the object. Every work of Art has a real intrinsic value that will be established in time. Meanwhile Stendhal's saying is true: "All that laymen require in their enjoyment of art—and it is much—is to *dare to think for themselves*." What touches their souls they would then buy, and if it does so touch them—it is worth the price. Too often they may admire the work, but do not venture to buy it, unless they are familiar with the name of the artist.

The successful Art Collector *naturally* appreciates the great qualities of a work of Art as a *matter of feeling*. He does not know why. Unfortunately he is often too diffident to trust his *feelings*, because he has no knowledge of the technique. And art, Great Art, is judged from other things than knowledge. Are there not many who love and enjoy Music through the emotions it arouses in them, and not from any acquaintance with its *science* and *technique*? A similar sympathetic admirer of the other arts is far less trusting to his intuitions.

This is unfortunate, for the collector should buy *only* what appeals to his *own soul*. A celebrated name on an inferior specimen of an artist's work too often satisfies his feeling of vanity; and only too often he buys works of art like sacks of wheat—in the hope of a rise in price.

Although a collection of works of art correctly made should reflect what the owner *felt* and honestly admired, a public museum must be omnivorous and

contain things to satisfy different tastes and not gratify one sort of nature only. It is also proper that it should, historically, present the different schools of art.

As the collector sometimes buys what he ought not to, so some artists, in the same spirit, often paint what they ought not to, but what they think they should. Such art is never fine. Decamps several times tried to paint in the style of the day, thinking his own style might be wrong. He could not do it, and was compelled to return to his own style. His genius conquered him and he gave in.

One may doubt oneself, but he is great whom art has taken up and will not drop—not he who takes up art and is not enslaved by it.

But now and then it is the spirit of the charlatan that dominates some artists. These have no convictions and seek success with the vulgar. For in the art world, as in the religious world, there are false prophets and they have their temporary following.

There is to-day such a spurious art movement, attracting the attention of the masses, who go to examine its falsity more out of curiosity, or for amusement. Being insincere, it will fail. For the collector should never forget that what is not sincere cannot touch us deeply, nor can what are mere artistic "stunts" of the abnormally eccentric endure long in the estimation of the world. For man is to-day of the same nature as of old. Material conditions may change enormously, but the soul of man does not become transformed. Hence, what we call Primitive art, largely on account of its less learned technique, may appeal to our highest emotions and be inspired by this same finer impulse, which is the eternal and universal element of all great art. The Greek robes are as noble and beautiful to us to-day as they were to the Greeks. What is consonant with beauty is never old fashioned, for it appeals to the soul from generation to generation.

Therefore the collector as well as the public must endeavor to judge all art by this higher standard and to appreciate more quickly those works which appeal to this soul-judgment, and not yield, in their purchasing or collecting, to the passing fads of the day. In so far as we can apply this higher standard of judgment will we have a finer Art and a finer Life around us. Thus the collector may become a far more active factor in the raising of our general civilization to that higher plane of which we all think of when we plan to lend our aid to the development of the Art of the Nation.

## THE CONNOISSEUR

The connoisseur—pray what is he?  
 Clear let the definition be:  
 Collectors buy what all do know,  
 No unknown names *their* pictures show.  
 The connoisseur more early buys  
 Nor waits until the plaudits rise.

William Sartin